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AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

Architectural Agents: The Delusional, Abusive, Addictive Lives of Buildings, by Annabel Jane Wharton

21 May 2015 | By Richard J. Williams

Richard J. Williams on an entertaining study that takes in Las Vegas, Jerusalem and the online worlds of Second Life

Annabel Jane Wharton's provocative and entertaining book shows how buildings may have "agency", and how "agency" may be destructive as much as constructive. The "delusional, abusive, addictive" lives of the title are cases of agency gone wrong, from New York to Jerusalem to Las Vegas to Second Life. It has a moral programme that becomes clear as the book goes along: if buildings misuse their agency, we should be able to stop them.

Put like that, the concept of architectural agency may raise a few academic eyebrows. While we might invoke architectural agency in our everyday lives (who, at some level, doesn't buy into the notion of "sick building syndrome"?), we steer students away from anything that smacks of anthropomorphism. After all, buildings are inanimate objects whose meanings are just arbitrary things we project on to them.

Or are they? It's a problem that Wharton deftly gets around by invoking archaic legal concepts (such as the medieval English *deodand*) that suppress anthropomorphism in favour of a sense that things in themselves simply have power over individuals: they do not have to be conscious to have agency.

Wharton then sets off on a tour of some difficult sites, starting with the Cloisters museum in Manhattan. Here, agency means, simply, murder. In creating one building, the Cloisters destroyed others, including the French abbey of Bonnefont-en-Comminges. All museums have this tendency, Wharton argues, the Cloisters more than most.

The Jerusalem case studies exemplify that city's appalling history. The first, the Rockefeller Archaeological Museum, is a perpetrator of violence in its de facto erasure of Jewish history, and the second, the American Colony Hotel, a pacificatory agent. These studies are extremely rich, and it is one of the book's great strengths that they show how these are of far more than local interest.

The latter chapters explore Las Vegas, and then the online worlds of Second Life, now a minnow in the gaming world, and action adventure games such as *Assassin's Creed*. Wharton's unease in these environments is clear. To her immense credit, however, she doesn't become proscriptive – instead, she immerses herself in them, showing with humour and grace how they function, and leaving us to make up our minds. The account of Vegas is probably the best thing written on the city since Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown. Not only does it show how far the city has evolved, but just how complex, and, how big it is (the Venetian hotel alone has more hotel rooms than the entire city of Venice).

The account of Second Life has Wharton, beguilingly, take on a virtual identity ("Benevolent String") and engage a taxi driver in conversation around the Israel Department of Tourism's crude rendering of the Dome of the Rock.

The book's conclusion is, unusually, the bit that does the theory, with reflections on agency in Henri Lefebvre, Bruno Latour and others. Leaving it last in fact gives us readers some agency. Having had the evidence, as it were, we can see how well the theories fit. And what it shows up is the limit of existing theory. As Wharton argues, extending a point made by Bernard Tschumi, buildings always exceed theory, and that excess, as it were, provides the space for agency.

Does *Architectural Agents* work? Well, not entirely. There is something arbitrary about the choice of case studies, and the concept of agency provokes more than it convinces. Still, it's good to be made to think about architectural determinism, when it is still in such use in the everyday world. And as a piece of writing, this really is a tour de force, richly imaginative, and full of warmth and insight.

Architectural Agents: The Delusional, Abusive, Addictive Lives of Buildings

By Annabel Jane Wharton

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Reviewer:

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